'I Don't Want To Feel Like I Can't Be Who I Am'

WNBA superstar Sheryl Swoopes goes public with her love—for her former coach Alisa Scott

For seven years, basketball superstar Sheryl Swoopes has kept a very big secret. Though many WNBA fans may remember the league's early years, when the glamorous 6-footer's husband and then-infant son Jordan were courtside fixtures, Swoopes's reality today is radically different: Since her marriage crumbled in 1998, Swoopes, 34, has been quietly sharing her life with another woman—her former coach Alisa "Scotty" Scott, 40. Now she has decided to come out, adding a deal with Olivia, a travel company that caters to lesbians, to her endorsement for Nike. "I'm nervous, I'm anxious, I'm excited, but I'm not scared," says Swoopes, as she sits on a terrace in Martina Franca, Italy, not far from where she is playing during the WNBA's off-season. "Scotty and I have been together for seven years. That's a long time to hide. It feels freeing."

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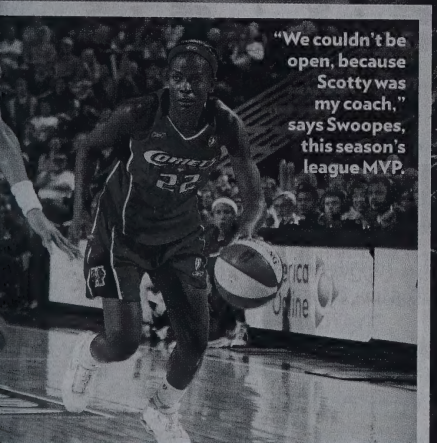

"We couldn't be open, because Scotty was my coach," says Swoopes, this season's league MVP.

"I feel like I've had to sacrifice a lot of happiness, hiding myself," says Swoopes.

Photographs by LORENZO PESCE

In college I was never with a woman. I had a boyfriend, and the thought of it never crossed my mind. I always had gay friends and we were cool. We hung out. But I didn't think about women that way. My marriage was beautiful, but we were both young, and we both grew up and went our separate ways. I tried to make it work, but I wasn't happy anymore.

As Swoopes's marriage was coming apart in '98, Scott joined the Houston Comets as an assistant coach.

Scotty was an ear. I'd tell her that I wasn't happy, that I didn't want to do this marriage anymore. She'd ask me if I'd done everything I could, if I'd tried marriage counseling. We would go to movies, go to eat, the same things you'd do with your friends. The more we hung out, I really grew attracted to her. So much that I stopped at a point and asked myself: What is going on here? I saw her almost every day. And I couldn't go a day without hearing her voice. Even with guys I'd never had those types of feelings. I'd call her and she'd answer, and I'd hang up. I was like a little kid. What was I going to say? "I need to see you?" At practices she'd flirt with me and I'd flirt with her. After dinner we'd go to a movie and I'd want to go to her place, but I'd say, "OK, I have to get home now."

Finally I just said, "I'm not going to try to fight this." Then I decided to just let things go as they were. Afterward, when you saw me, you saw Scotty. But we didn't hold hands in public or anything.

Jordan, now 8, has grown up with the two women, but Swoopes has never fully explained their romance.

My son is my biggest concern. I know my son loves me dearly, and I know he loves Scotty the same way. He calls me Mommy 1 and her Mommy 2. We're a family. But kids can be really ugly. I'll ask him, "Jordan, has anybody said anything to you? Teased you?" and he'll say, "No." Then he'll say, "Why?"

He only wants to know so much. I just hope he'll be okay with it.

Swoopes has been out to her family for years but worries how her mother's friends will react.

My mom is really, really big in her church, and now all of her friends are going to know that her only daughter is gay. I know my mom will always love me, but I think it's going to be hard for her. I remember when I first told her about me and Scotty she was wondering what she did wrong. And I told her, "You didn't do anything wrong. Aren't I a great kid?" I'm ready to do this and see what happens. I've never been happier in my life.

As told to Courtney Rubin

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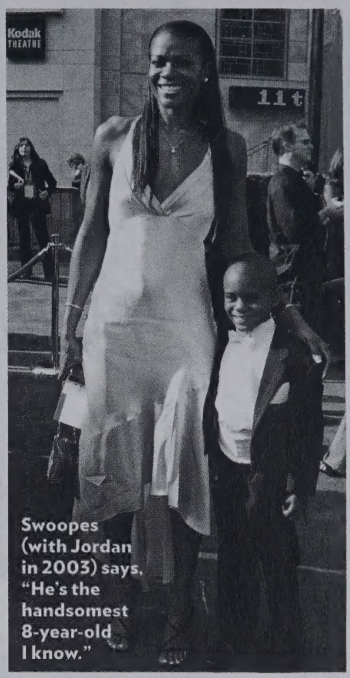

Swoopes (with Jordan in 2003) says, "He's the handsomest 8-year-old I know."

"I've known for a long time it's okay to love someone as much as I love Sheryl, but to let the world know... it's just great," says Scott (right, with Swoopes in October).